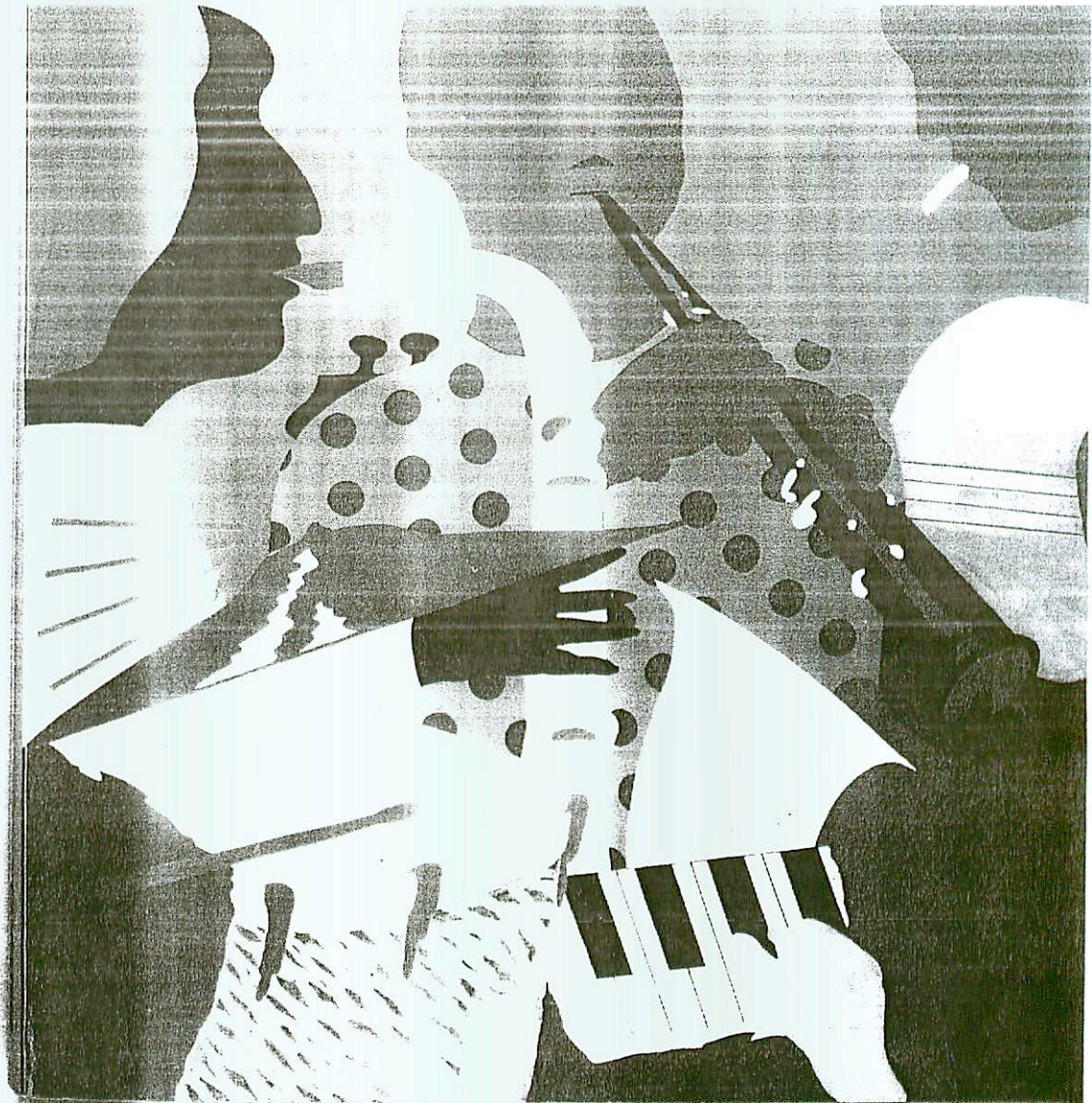


# Legitimate Peripheral Participation

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**Legitimate Peripheral  
Participation in Communities  
of Practice**



We now can begin to turn the observations of the previous chapter into objects to be analyzed. In the following sections, we recast the central characteristics of these several historical realizations of apprenticeship in terms of legitimate peripheral participation. First, we discuss the structuring resources that shape the process and content of learning possibilities and apprentices' changing perspectives on what is known and done. Then we argue that "transparency" of the sociopolitical organization of practice, of its content and of the artifacts engaged in practice, is a crucial resource for increasing participation. We next examine the relation of newcomers to the discourse of practice. This leads to a discussion of how identity and motivation are generated as newcomers move toward full participation. Finally, we explore contradictions inherent in learning, and the relations of the resulting conflicts to the development of identity and the transformation of practice.

#### STRUCTURING RESOURCES FOR LEARNING IN PRACTICE

One of the first things people think of when apprenticeship is mentioned is the master-apprentice relation. But in practice the roles of masters are surprisingly variable across time and place. A specific master-apprentice relation is not even ubiquitously characteristic of apprenticeship learning. Indeed, neither Yucatec midwives nor quartermasters learn in specific master-apprentice relations. Newcomers to A. A. do have special relations with specific old-timers who act as their sponsors, but these relations are not what defines them as newcomers. In contrast, tailors' apprentices most certainly have spe-

cific relations with their masters, without whom they wouldn't be apprentices. Master tailors must sponsor apprentices before the latter can have legitimate access to participation in the community's productive activities. In short, the form in which such legitimate access is secured for apprentices depends on the characteristics of the division of labor in the social milieu in which the community of practice is located. Thus, the midwife is learning a specialism within her own family of orientation, a form of labor different, but not separated in marked ways, from the widely distributed "ordinary" activities of everyday life; legitimate participation comes diffusely through membership in family and community. Where apprentices learn a specialized occupation, sponsorship into a community of practice – within a community in the more general sense – becomes an issue. Intentional relations, and even contractual relations with a specific master, are common. It should be clear that, in shaping the relation of masters to apprentices, the issue of conferring legitimacy is more important than the issue of providing teaching.

Even in the case of the tailors, where the relation of apprentice to master is specific and explicit, it is not this relationship, but rather the apprentice's relations to other apprentices and even to other masters that organize opportunities to learn; an apprentice's own master is too distant, an object of too much respect, to engage with in awkward attempts at a new activity. In A. A., old-timers who act as "sponsors" reportedly withhold advice and instruction appropriate to later stages; they hold back and wait until the newcomer becomes "ready" for a next step through increasing participation in the community (Alibrandi 1977). In all five cases described in the preceding chapter, in fact, researchers insist that there is very little observable teaching; the more basic phenomenon is learning. The

practice of the community creates the potential "curriculum" in the broadest sense – that which may be learned by newcomers with legitimate peripheral access. Learning activity appears to have a characteristic pattern. There are strong goals for learning because learners, as peripheral participants, can develop a view of what the whole enterprise is about, and what there is to be learned. Learning itself is an improvised practice: A learning curriculum unfolds in opportunities for engagement in practice. It is not specified as a set of dictates for proper practice.

In apprenticeship opportunities for learning are, more often than not, given structure by work practices instead of by strongly asymmetrical master-apprentice relations. Under these circumstances learners may have a space of "benign community neglect" in which to configure their own learning relations with other apprentices. There may be a looser coupling between relations among learner on the one hand and the often hierarchical relations between learners and old-timers on the other hand, than where directive pedagogy is the central motive of institutional organization. It seems typical of apprenticeship that apprentices learn mostly in relation with other apprentices. There is anecdotal evidence (Butler personal communication; Hass n.d.) that where the circulation of knowledge among peers and near-peers is possible, it spreads exceedingly rapidly and effectively. The central grounds on which forms of education that differ from schooling are condemned are that changing the person is not the central motive of the enterprise in which learning takes place (see the last section of this chapter). The effectiveness of the circulation of information among peers suggests, to the contrary, that engaging in practice, rather than being its object, may well be a *condition* for the effectiveness of learning.



So far, we have observed that the authority of masters and their involvement in apprenticeship varies dramatically across communities of practice. We have also pointed out that structuring resources for learning come from a variety of sources, not only from pedagogical activity. We argue that a coherent explanation of these observations depends upon *decentering* common notions of mastery and pedagogy. This decentering strategy is, in fact, deeply embedded in our situated approach – for to shift as we have from the notion of an individual learner to the concept of legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice is precisely to decenter analysis of learning. To take a decentered view of master-apprentice relations leads to an understanding that mastery resides not in the master but in the organization of the community of practice of which the master is part: The master as the locus of authority (in several senses) is, after all, as much a product of the conventional, centered theory of learning as is the individual learner. Similarly, a decentered view of the master as pedagogue moves the focus of analysis away from teaching and onto the intricate structuring of a community's learning resources.

THE PLACE OF KNOWLEDGE: PARTICIPATION,  
LEARNING CURRICULA, COMMUNITIES OF  
PRACTICE

The social relations of apprentices within a community change through their direct involvement in activities; in the process, the apprentices' understanding and knowledgeable skills develop. In the recent past, the only means we have had for

understanding the processes by which these changes occur have come from conventional speculations about the nature of "informal" learning: That is, apprentices are supposed to acquire the "specifics" of practice through "observation and imitation." But this view is in all probability wrong in every particular, or right in particular circumstances, but for the wrong reasons. We argue instead that the effects of peripheral participation on knowledge-in-practice are not properly understood; and that studies of apprenticeship have presumed too literal a coupling of work processes and learning processes.

To begin with, newcomers' legitimate peripherality provides them with more than an "observational" lookout post: It crucially involves *participation* as a way of learning – of both absorbing and being absorbed in – the "culture of practice." An extended period of legitimate peripherality provides learners with opportunities to make the culture of practice theirs. From a broadly peripheral perspective, apprentices gradually assemble a general idea of what constitutes the practice of the community. This uneven sketch of the enterprise (available if there is legitimate access) might include who is involved; what they do; what everyday life is like; how masters talk, walk, work, and generally conduct their lives; how people who are not part of the community of practice interact with it; what other learners are doing; and what learners need to learn to become full practitioners. It includes an increasing understanding of how, when, and about what old-timers collaborate, collude, and collide, and what they enjoy, dislike, respect, and admire. In particular, it offers exemplars (which are grounds and motivation for learning activity), including masters, finished products, and more advanced apprentices in the process of becoming full practitioners.

Such a general view, however, is not likely to be frozen in



initial impressions. Viewpoints from which to understand the practice evolve through changing participation in the division of labor, changing relations to ongoing community practices, and changing social relations in the community. This is as true, in different ways, of reformed alcoholics as they socialize with other A. A. members as it is of quartermasters as they move through different aspects of navigation work. And learners have multiply structured relations with ongoing practice in other ways. Apprenticeship learning is not "work-driven" in the way stereotypes of informal learning have suggested; the ordering of learning and of everyday practice do not coincide. Production activity-segments must be learned in different sequences than those in which a production process commonly unfolds, if peripheral, less intense, less complex, less vital tasks are learned before more central aspects of practice.

Consider, for instance, the tailors' apprentices, whose involvement starts with both initial preparations for the tailors' daily labor and finishing details on completed garments. The apprentices progressively move backward through the production process to cutting jobs. (This kind of progression is quite common across cultures and historical periods.) Under these circumstances, the initial "circumferential" perspective absorbed in partial, peripheral, apparently trivial activities – running errands, delivering messages, or accompanying others – takes on new significance: It provides a first approximation to an armature of the structure of the community of practice. Things learned, and various and changing viewpoints, can be arranged and interrelated in ways that gradually transform that skeletal understanding.

When directive teaching in the form of prescriptions about proper practice generates one circumscribed form of participation (in school), preempting participation in ongoing prac-

tice as the legitimate source of learning opportunities, the goal of complying with the requirements specified by teaching engenders a practice different from that intended (Bourdieu 1977). In such cases, even though the pedagogical structure of the circumstances of learning has moved away from the principle of legitimate peripheral participation with respect to the target practice, legitimate peripheral participation is still the core of the learning that takes place. This leads us to distinguish between a *learning curriculum* and a *teaching curriculum*. A learning curriculum consists of situated opportunities (thus including exemplars of various sorts often thought of as "goals") for the improvisational development of new practice (Lave 1989). A learning curriculum is a field of learning resources in everyday practice *viewed from the perspective of learners*. A teaching curriculum, by contrast, is constructed for the instruction of newcomers. When a teaching curriculum supplies – and thereby limits – structuring resources for learning, the meaning of what is learned (and control of access to it, both in its peripheral forms and its subsequently more complex and intensified, though possibly more fragmented, forms) is mediated through an instructor's participation, by an external view of what knowing is about. The learning curriculum in didactic situations, then, evolves out of participation in a specific community of practice engendered by pedagogical relations and by a prescriptive view of the target practice as a subject matter, as well as out of the many and various relations that tie participants to their own and to other institutions.

A learning curriculum is essentially situated. It is not something that can be considered in isolation, manipulated in arbitrary didactic terms, or analyzed apart from the social relations that shape legitimate peripheral participation. A learning curriculum is thus characteristic of a community. In using the



term community, we do not imply some primordial culture-sharing entity. We assume that members have different interests, make diverse contributions to activity, and hold varied viewpoints. In our view, participation at multiple levels is entailed in membership in a *community of practice*. Nor does the term community imply necessarily co-presence, a well-defined, identifiable group, or socially visible boundaries. It does imply participation in an activity system about which participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their communities.

The concept of community underlying the notion of legitimate peripheral participation, and hence of "knowledge" and its "location" in the lived-in world, is both crucial and subtle. The community of practice of midwifery or tailoring involves much more than the technical knowledgeable skill involved in delivering babies or producing clothes. A community of practice is a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice. A community of practice is an intrinsic condition for the existence of knowledge, not least because it provides the interpretive support necessary for making sense of its heritage. Thus, participation in the cultural practice in which any knowledge exists is an epistemological principle of learning. The social structure of this practice, its power relations, and its conditions for legitimacy define possibilities for learning (i.e., for legitimate peripheral participation).

It is possible to delineate the community that is the site of a learning process by analyzing the reproduction cycles of the communities that seem to be involved and their relations. For

the quartermasters, the cycle of navigational practice is quite short; a complete reproduction of the practice of quartermastering may take place every five or six years (as a novice enters, gradually becomes a full participant, begins to work with newcomer quartermasters who in their own turn become full participants and reach the point at which they are ready to work with newcomers). The reproduction cycle of the midwives', the tailors', or the butchers' communities is much longer. In A. A., its length is rather variable as individuals go through successive steps at their own pace. Observing the span of developmental cycles is only a beginning to such an analysis (and a rough approximation that sets aside consideration of the transformation and change inherent in ongoing practice – see below), for each such cycle has its own trajectory, benchmarks, blueprints, and careers (Stack 1989).

In addition to the useful analytic questions suggested by a temporal focus on communities of practice, there is a further reason to address the delineation of communities of practice in processual, historical terms. Claims *about* the definition of a community of practice and the community of practice actually in process of reproduction in that location may not coincide – a point worth careful consideration.

For example, in most high schools there is a group of students engaged over a substantial period of time in learning physics. What community of practice is in the process of reproduction? Possibly the students participate only in the reproduction of the high school itself. But assuming that the practice of physics is also being reproduced in some form, there are vast differences between the ways high school physics students participate in and give meaning to their activity and the way professional physicists do. The actual reproducing community of practice, within which schoolchildren learn about



physics, is not the community of physicists but the community of schooled adults. Children are introduced into the latter community (and its humble relation with the former community) during their school years. The reproduction cycles of the physicists' community start much later, possibly only in graduate school (Traweek 1988).

In this view, problems of schooling are not, at their most fundamental level, pedagogical. Above all, they have to do with the ways in which the community of adults reproduces itself, with the places that newcomers can or cannot find in such communities, and with relations that can or cannot be established between these newcomers and the cultural and political life of the community.

In summary, rather than learning by replicating the performances of others or by acquiring knowledge transmitted in instruction, we suggest that learning occurs through centripetal participation in the learning curriculum of the ambient community. Because the place of knowledge is within a community of practice, questions of learning must be addressed within the developmental cycles of that community, a recommendation which creates a diagnostic tool for distinguishing among communities of practice.

#### THE PROBLEM OF ACCESS: TRANSPARENCY AND SEQUESTRATION

The key to legitimate peripherality is access by newcomers to the community of practice and all that membership entails. But though this is essential to the reproduction of any community, it is always problematic at the same time. To become a full

member of a community of practice requires access to a wide range of ongoing activity, old-timers, and other members of the community; and to information, resources, and opportunities for participation. The issue is so central to membership in communities of practice that, in a sense, all that we have said so far is about access. Here we discuss the problem more specifically in connection with issues of understanding and control, which along with involvement in productive activity are related aspects of the legitimate peripherality of participants in a practice.

The artifacts employed in ongoing practice, the technology of practice, provide a good arena in which to discuss the problem of access to understanding. In general, social scientists who concern themselves with learning treat technology as a given and are not analytic about its interrelations with other aspects of a community of practice. Becoming a full participant certainly includes engaging with the technologies of everyday practice, as well as participating in the social relations, production processes, and other activities of communities of practice. But the understanding to be gained from engagement with technology can be extremely varied depending on the form of participation enabled by its use. Participation involving technology is especially significant because the artifacts used within a cultural practice carry a substantial portion of that practice's heritage. For example, the alidade used by the quartermasters for taking bearings has developed as a navigational instrument over hundreds of years, and embodies calculations invented long ago (Hutchins in press). Thus, understanding the technology of practice is more than learning to use tools; it is a way to connect with the history of the practice and to participate more directly in its cultural life.

The significance of artifacts in the full complexity of their



relations with the practice can be more or less *transparent* to learners. Transparency in its simplest form may just imply that the inner workings of an artifact are available for the learner's inspection: The black box can be opened, it can become a "glass box." But there is more to understanding the use and significance of an artifact: Knowledge within a community of practice and ways of perceiving and manipulating objects characteristic of community practices are encoded in artifacts in ways that can be more or less revealing. Moreover, the activity system and the social world of which an artifact is part are reflected in multiple ways in its design and use and can become further "fields of transparency," just as they can remain opaque. Obviously, the transparency of any technology always exists with respect to some purpose and is intricately tied to the cultural practice and social organization within which the technology is meant to function: It cannot be viewed as a feature of an artifact in itself but as a process that involves specific forms of participation, in which the technology fulfills a mediating function. Apprentice quartermasters not only have access to the physical activities going on around them and to the tools of the trade; they participate in information flows and conversations, in a context in which they can make sense of what they observe and hear. In focusing on the epistemological role of artifacts in the context of the social organization of knowledge, this notion of transparency constitutes, as it were, the cultural organization of access. As such, it does not apply to technology only, but to all forms of access to practice.

Productive activity and understanding are not separate, or even separable, but dialectically related. Thus, the term *transparency* when used here in connection with technology refers to the way in which using artifacts and understanding their

significance interact to become one learning process. Mirroring the intricate relation between using and understanding artifacts, there is an interesting duality inherent in the concept of transparency. It combines the two characteristics of *invisibility* and *visibility*: invisibility in the form of unproblematic interpretation and integration into activity, and visibility in the form of extended access to information. This is not a simple dichotomous distinction, since these two crucial characteristics are in a complex interplay, their relation being one of both conflict and synergy.

It might be useful to give a sense of this interplay by analogy to a window. A window's invisibility is what makes it a window, that is, an object through which the world outside becomes visible. The very fact, however, that so many things can be seen through it makes the window itself highly visible, that is, very salient in a room, when compared to, say, a solid wall. Invisibility of mediating technologies is necessary for allowing focus on, and thus supporting visibility of, the subject matter. Conversely, visibility of the significance of the technology is necessary for allowing its unproblematic – invisible – use. This interplay of conflict and synergy is central to all aspects of learning in practice: It makes the design of supportive artifacts a matter of providing a good balance between these two interacting requirements. (An extended analysis of the concept of transparency can be found in Wenger 1990.)

Control and selection, as well as the need for access, are inherent in communities of practice. Thus access is liable to manipulation, giving legitimate peripherality an ambivalent status: Depending on the organization of access, legitimate peripherality can either promote or prevent legitimate participation. In the study of the butchers' apprentices, Marshall pro-



vides examples of how access can be denied. The trade school and its shop exercises did not simulate the central practices of meat cutting in supermarkets, much less make them accessible to apprentices; on-the-job training was not much of an improvement. Worse, the master butchers confined their apprentices to jobs that were removed from activities rather than peripheral to them. To the extent that the community of practice routinely sequesters newcomers, either very directly as in the example of apprenticeship for the butchers, or in more subtle and pervasive ways as in schools, these newcomers are prevented from peripheral participation. In either case legitimacy is not in question. Schoolchildren are legitimately peripheral, but kept from participation in the social world more generally. The butchers' apprentices participate legitimately, but not peripherally, in that they are not given productive access to activity in the community of practitioners.

An important point about such sequestering when it is institutionalized is that it encourages a folk epistemology of dichotomies, for instance, between "abstract" and "concrete" knowledge. These categories do not reside in the world as distinct forms of *knowledge*, nor do they reflect some putative hierarchy of forms of knowledge among practitioners. Rather, they derive from the nature of the new practice generated by sequestration. *Abstraction* in this sense stems from the disconnectedness of a particular cultural practice. Participation in that practice is neither more nor less abstract or concrete, experiential or cerebral, than in any other. Thus, legitimate peripheral participation as the core concept of relations of learning places the explanatory burden for issues such as "understanding" and "levels" of abstraction or conceptualization not on one type of learning as opposed to another, but on the cultural practice in which the learning is taking place, on issues of access, and

on the transparency of the cultural environment with respect to the meaning of what is being learned. Insofar as the notion of transparency, taken very broadly, is a way of organizing activities that makes their meaning visible, it opens an alternative approach to the traditional dichotomy between learning experientially and learning at a distance, between learning by doing and learning by abstraction.

#### DISCOURSE AND PRACTICE

The characterization of language in learning has, in discussions of conventional contrasts between formal and informal learning, been treated as highly significant in classifying ways of transmitting knowledge. Verbal instruction has been assumed to have special, and especially effective properties with respect to the generality and scope of the understanding that learners come away with, while instruction by demonstration – learning by "observation and imitation" – is supposed to produce the opposite, a literal and narrow effect.

Close analysis of both instructional discourse and cases of apprenticeship raise a different point: Issues about language, like those about the role of masters, may well have more to do with legitimacy of participation and with access to peripherality than they do with knowledge transmission. Indeed, as Jordan (1989) argues, learning to become a legitimate participant in a community involves learning how to talk (and be silent) in the manner of full participants. In A. A. telling the story of the life of the nondrinking alcoholic is clearly a major vehicle for the display of membership. Models for constructing A. A. life stories are widely available in published accounts of alco-



holics' lives and in the storytelling performances of old-timers. Early on, newcomers learn to preface their contributions to A.A. meetings with the simple identifying statement "I'm a recovering alcoholic," and, shortly, to introduce themselves and sketch the problems that brought them to A.A. They begin by describing these events in non-A.A. terms. Their accounts meet with counterexemplary stories by more-experienced members who do not criticize or correct newcomers' accounts directly. They gradually generate a view that matches more closely the A.A. model, eventually producing skilled testimony in public meetings and gaining validation from others as they demonstrate the appropriate understanding.

The process of learning to speak as a full member of a community of practice is vividly illustrated in an analysis of the changing performances of newcomer spirit mediums in a spiritist congregation in Mexico (Kearney 1977). This example is interesting partly because the notion of "proper speech" is so clearly crystallized in the collective expectations of the community, while at the same time, if the community were forced to acknowledge the idea that mediums must *learn* their craft, this would negate the legitimacy of spirit possession. That learning through legitimate peripheral participation nonetheless occurs makes this example especially striking.

Spiritist cult communities center around women who are adept at going into trance. They act as mediums, transmitting the messages of a variety of spirits. The spirits are arranged in a complex hierarchy of more- and less-important forms of deity. It takes a great deal of practice to speak coherently while in trance, especially while taking on a variety of personae.

It is quite apparent from biographical data I have on mediums that they typically begin "working" with

various [unimportant] exotic spirits who have idiosyncratic speech patterns, and then eventually switch to working with the [highly revered] Divinities who typically speak in a much more stereotypic manner. . . . Recently several novice mediums have been "entered" by "beings from outer space." These beings appeared quite intent on speaking to those present via the mediums, but of course their language was incomprehensible to the audience. During the course of repeated visits, however, and with help from nonpossessed spiritualists, they slowly "began to learn to speak the Spanish language," and to articulate their messages. . . . A . . . characteristic of advanced mediums as compared with novices is the large repertoire and wider range of identities displayed by the former [Kearney 1977].

In the *Psychology of Literacy*, Scribner and Cole (1981) speculate that asking questions – learning how to "do" school appropriately – may be a major part of what school teaches. This is also Jordan's conclusion about Yucatec midwives' participation in biomedical, state-sponsored training courses. She argues that the verbal instruction provided by health officials has the effect of teaching midwives how to talk in biomedical terms when required. Such talk only serves to give them "face validity" in the eyes of others who believe in the authoritative character of biomedicine. But Jordan argues that it has no effect on their existing practice.

This point about language use is consonant with the earlier argument that didactic instruction creates unintended practices. The conflict stems from the fact that there is a difference between talking *about* a practice from outside and talking *within*



it. Thus the didactic use of language, not itself the discourse of practice, creates a new linguistic practice, which has an existence of its own. Legitimate peripheral participation in such linguistic practice is a form of learning, but does not imply that newcomers learn the actual practice the language is supposed to be about.

In a community or practice, there are no special forms of discourse aimed at apprentices or crucial to their centripetal movement toward full participation that correspond to the marked genres of the question-answer-evaluation format of classroom teaching, or the lecturing of college professors or midwife-training course instructors. But Jordan makes a further, acute, observation about language, this time about the role of *stories* in apprenticeship: She points out that stories play a major role in decision making (1989). This has implications for what and how newcomers learn. For apprenticeship learning is supported by conversations and stories about problematic and especially difficult cases.

What happens is that as difficulties of one kind or another develop, stories of similar cases are offered up by the attendants [at a birth], all of whom, it should be remembered, are experts, having themselves given birth. In the ways in which these stories are treated, elaborated, ignored, taken up, characterized as typical and so on, the collaborative work of deciding on the present case is done. . . . These stories, then, are packages of situated knowledge. . . . To acquire a store of appropriate stories and, even more importantly, to know what are appropriate occasions for telling them, is then part of what it means to become a midwife [1989: 935].

Orr (in press) describes comparable patterns of story telling in his research on the learning of machine-repair work: Technicians who repair copier machines tell each other "war stories" about their past experiences in making repairs. Such stories constitute a vital part of diagnosing and carrying out new repairs. In the process, newcomers learn how to make (sometimes difficult) repairs, they learn the skills of war-story telling, and they become legitimate participants in the community of practice. In A. A. also, discussions have a dual purpose. Participants engage in the work of staying sober and they do so through gradual construction of an identity. Telling the personal story is a tool of diagnosis and reinterpretation. Its communal use is essential to the fashioning of an identity as a recovered alcoholic, and thus to remaining sober. It becomes a display of membership by virtue of fulfilling a crucial function in the shared practice.

It is thus necessary to refine our distinction between *talking about* and *talking within* a practice. Talking within itself includes both talking within (e.g., exchanging information necessary to the progress of ongoing activities) and talking about (e.g., stories, community lore). Inside the shared practice, both forms of talk fulfill specific functions: engaging, focusing, and shifting attention, bringing about coordination, etc., on the one hand; and supporting communal forms of memory and reflection, as well as signaling membership, on the other. (And, similarly, talking about includes both forms of talk once it becomes part of a practice of its own, usually sequestered in some respects.) For newcomers then the purpose is not to learn *from* talk as a substitute for legitimate peripheral participation; it is to learn *to* talk as a key to legitimate peripheral participation.



MOTIVATION AND IDENTITY: EFFECTS OF  
PARTICIPATION

It is important to emphasize that, during the extended period of legitimate participation typical of the cases of apprenticeship described here, newcomers participate in a community of practitioners as well as in productive activity. Legitimate peripheral participation is an initial form of membership characteristic of such a community. Acceptance by and interaction with acknowledged adept practitioners make learning legitimate and of value from the point of view of the apprentice. More generally, learning in practice, apprentice learners know that there is a field for the mature practice of what they are learning to do – midwifing, tailoring, quartermastering, butchering, or being sober. The community of midwives, tailors, quartermasters, butchers, or nondrinking alcoholics and their productive relations with the world provide apprentices with these continuity-based “futures.”

To be able to participate in a legitimately peripheral way entails that newcomers have broad access to arenas of mature practice. At the same time, productive peripherality requires less demands on time, effort, and responsibility for work than for full participants. A newcomer’s tasks are short and simple, the costs of errors are small, the apprentice has little responsibility for the activity as a whole. A newcomer’s tasks tend to be positioned at the ends of branches of work processes, rather than in the middle of linked work segments. A midwife’s apprentice runs errands. Tailors’ apprentices do maintenance on the sewing machine before the master begins work, and finishing details when the master has completed a pair of trousers; a lot of time in between is spent sitting beside the master on his

two-person bench. For the quartermasters, the earliest jobs are physically at the periphery of the work space. In many cases, distinctions between play and work, or between peripheral activity and other work, are little marked. In all five cases of apprenticeship, however, it is also true that the initial, partial contributions of apprentices are useful. Even the A. A. newcomer, while reinterpreting his or her life, produces new material that contributes to the communal construction of an understanding of alcoholism. An apprentice’s contributions to ongoing activity gain value in practice – a value which increases as the apprentice becomes more adept. As opportunities for understanding how well or poorly one’s efforts contribute are evident in practice, legitimate participation of a peripheral kind provides an immediate ground for self-evaluation. The sparsity of tests, praise, or blame typical of apprenticeship follows from the apprentice’s legitimacy as a participant.

Notions like those of “intrinsic rewards” in empirical studies of apprenticeship focus quite narrowly on task knowledge and skill as the activities to be learned. Such knowledge is of course important; but a deeper sense of the value of participation to the community and the learner lies in *becoming* part of the community. Thus, making a hat reasonably well is seen as evidence that an apprentice tailor is becoming “a masterful practitioner,” though it may also be perceived in a more utilitarian vein in terms of reward or even value. Similarly, telling one’s life story or making a Twelfth Step call confers a sense of belonging. Moving toward full participation in practice involves not just a greater commitment of time, intensified effort, more and broader responsibilities within the community, and more difficult and risky tasks, but, more significantly, an increasing sense of identity as a master practitioner.



When the process of increasing participation is not the primary motivation for learning, it is often because "didactic caretakers" assume responsibility for motivating newcomers. In such circumstances, the focus of attention shifts from co-participating in practice to acting upon the person-to-be-changed. Such a shift is typical of situations, such as schooling, in which pedagogically structured content organizes learning activities. Overlooking the importance of legitimate participation by newcomers in the target practice has two related consequences. First, the identity of learners becomes an explicit object of change. When central participation is the subjective intention motivating learning, changes in cultural identity and social relations are inevitably part of the process, but learning does not have to be mediated – and distorted – through a learner's view of "self" as *object*. Second, where there is no cultural identity encompassing the activity in which newcomers participate and no field of mature practice for what is being learned, exchange value replaces the use value of increasing participation. The commoditization of learning engenders a fundamental contradiction between the use and exchange values of the outcome of learning, which manifests itself in conflicts between learning to know and learning to display knowledge for evaluation. Testing in schools and trade schools (unnecessary in situations of apprenticeship learning) is perhaps the most pervasive and salient example of a way of establishing the exchange value of knowledge. Test taking then becomes a new parasitic practice, the goal of which is to increase the exchange value of learning independently of its use value.

CONTRADICTIONS AND CHANGE: CONTINUITY  
AND DISPLACEMENT

To account for the complexity of participation in social practice, it is essential to give learning and teaching independent status as analytic concepts. Primary reliance on the concept of pedagogical structuring in learning research may well prevent speculation about what teaching consists of, how it is perceived, and how – as perceived – it affects learning. Most analyses of schooling assume, whether intentionally or not, the uniform motivation of teacher and pupils, because they assume, sometimes quite explicitly, that teacher and pupils share the goal of the main activity (e.g., Davydov and Markova 1983). In our view, this assumption has several consequences. First, it ignores the conflicting viewpoints associated with teaching and learning, respectively, and obscures the distortions that ensue (Fajans and Turner in preparation). Furthermore, it reflects too narrowly rationalistic a perspective on the person and motivation. The multiple viewpoints that are characteristic of participation in a community of practice, and thus of legitimate peripheral participation, are to be found in more complex theories of the person-in-society, such as those proposed by critical psychologists. Finally, assumptions of uniformity make it difficult to explore the mechanisms by which processes of change and transformation in communities practice and processes of learning are intricately implicated in each other.

In considering learning as part of social practice, we have focused our attention on the structure of social practice rather than privileging the structure of pedagogy as the source of learning. Learning understood as legitimate peripheral participation is not necessarily or directly dependent on pedagogical goals or official agenda, even in situations in which these goals



appear to be a central factor (e.g., classroom instruction, tutoring). We have insisted that exposure to resources for learning is not restricted to a teaching curriculum and that instructional assistance is not construed as a purely interpersonal phenomenon; rather we have argued that learning must be understood with respect to a practice as a whole, with its multiplicity of relations – both within the community and with the world at large. Dissociating learning from pedagogical intentions opens the possibility of mismatch or conflict among practitioners' viewpoints in situations where learning is going on. These differences often must become constitutive of the content of learning.

We mentioned earlier that a major contradiction lies between legitimate peripheral participation as the means of achieving continuity over generations for the community of practice, and the displacement inherent in that same process as full participants are replaced (directly or indirectly) by newcomers-become-old-timers. Both Fortes (1938) and Goody (1989) have commented on this conflict between continuity and displacement, which is surely part of all learning. This tension is in fact fundamental – a basic contradiction of social reproduction, transformation, and change. In recent accounts of learning by activity theorists (e.g., Engeström 1987), the major contradiction underlying the historical development of learning is that of the commodity. Certainly this is fundamental to the historical shaping of social reproduction as well as production. But we believe that a second contradiction – that between continuity and displacement – is also fundamental to the social relations of production and to the social reproduction of labor. Studies of learning might benefit from examining the field of relations generated by these interrelated contradictions. For if production and the social reproduction of persons

are mutually entailed in the reproduction of the social order, the contradictions inherent in reproducing persons within the domestic group and other communities of practice do not go away when the form of production changes, but go through transformations of their own. How to characterize these contradictions in changing forms of production is surely the central question underlying a historical understanding of forms of learning, family, and of course, schooling.

The continuity–displacement contradiction is present during apprenticeship, whether apprentice and master jointly have a stake in the increasingly knowledgeable skill of the apprentice, as among the tailors and midwives, or whether there is a conflict between the master's desire for labor and the apprentice's desire to learn (see Goody 1982), as among the meat cutters. The different ways in which old-timers and newcomers establish and maintain identities conflict and generate competing viewpoints on the practice and its development. Newcomers are caught in a dilemma. On the one hand, they need to engage in the existing practice, which has developed over time: to understand it, to participate in it, and to become full members of the community in which it exists. On the other hand, they have a stake in its development as they begin to establish their own identity in its future.

We have claimed that the development of identity is central to the careers of newcomers in communities of practice, and thus fundamental to the concept of legitimate peripheral participation. This is illustrated most vividly by the experience of newcomers to A. A., but we think that it is true of all learning. In fact, we have argued that, from the perspective we have developed here, learning and a sense of identity are inseparable: They are aspects of the same phenomenon.

Insofar as the conflicts in which the continuity–displace-



ment contradiction is manifested involve power – as they do to a large extent – the way the contradiction is played out changes as power relations change. Conflicts between masters and apprentices (or, less individualistically, between generations) take place in the course of everyday participation. Shared participation is the stage on which the old and the new, the known and the unknown, the established and the hopeful, act out their differences and discover their commonalities, manifest their fear of one another, and come to terms with their need for one another. Each threatens the fulfillment of the other's destiny, just as it is essential to it. Conflict is experienced and worked out through a shared everyday practice in which differing viewpoints and common stakes are in interplay. Learners can be overwhelmed, overawed, and overworked. Yet even when submissive imitation is the result, learning is never simply a matter of the "transmission" of knowledge or the "acquisition" of skill; identity in relation with practice, and hence knowledge and skill and their significance to the subject and the community, are never unproblematic. This helps to account for the common observation that knowers come in a range of types, from clones to heretics.

Granting legitimate participation to newcomers with their own viewpoints introduces into any community of practice all the tensions of the continuity-displacement contradiction. These may be muted, though not extinguished, by the differences of power between old-timers and newcomers. As a way in which the related conflicts are played out in practice, legitimate peripheral participation is far more than just a process of learning on the part of newcomers. It is a reciprocal relation between persons and practice. This means that the move of learners toward full participation in a community of practice does not take place in a static context. The practice itself is in motion.

Since activity and the participation of individuals involved in it, their knowledge, and their perspectives are mutually constitutive, change is a fundamental property of communities of practice and their activities. Goody (1989) argues that the introduction of strangers into what was previously strictly domestic production (a change that occurred within an expanding market in West Africa in the recent past) led masters to think more comprehensively about the organization of their production activities. She points out that the resulting division of work processes into segments to be learned has been mirrored in subsequent generations in new, increasingly specialized occupations. Legitimate peripherality is important for developing "constructively naive" perspectives or questions. From this point of view, inexperience is an asset to be exploited. It is of use, however, only in the context of participation, when supported by experienced practitioners who both understand its limitations and value its role. Legitimacy of participation is crucial both for this naive involvement to invite reflection on ongoing activity and for the newcomer's occasional contributions to be taken into account. Insofar as this continual interaction of new perspectives is sanctioned, everyone's participation is legitimately peripheral in some respect. In other words, everyone can to some degree be considered a "newcomer" to the future of a changing community.



## Conclusion



## *Conclusion*

Until recently, the notion of a concept was viewed as something for which clarity, precision, simplicity, and maximum definition seemed commendable. We have tried, in reflective consonance with our theoretical perspective, to reconceive it in interconnected, relational terms. Thus the concept of legitimate peripheral participation obtains its meaning, not in a concise definition of its boundaries, but in its multiple, theoretically generative interconnections with persons, activities, knowing, and world. Exploring these interconnections in specific cases has provided a way to engage in the practice-theory project that insists on participation in the lived-in world as a key unit of analysis in a theory of social practice (which includes learning), and to develop our thinking in the spirit of this theoretically integrative enterprise.

There has crept into our analysis, as we have moved away from conventional notions of learning, an expanded scale of time and a more encompassing view of what constitutes learning activity. Legitimate peripheral participation has led us to emphasize the sustained character of developmental cycles of communities of practice, the gradual process of fashioning relations of identity as a full practitioner, and the enduring strains inherent in the continuity-displacement contradiction. This longer and broader conception of what it means to learn, implied by the concept of legitimate peripheral participation, comes closer to embracing the rich significance of learning in human experience.

We have thus situated learning in the trajectories of participation in which it takes on meaning. These trajectories must themselves be situated in the social world. Theories of practice growing out of psychological orientations – even those focused on activity – have left as an important set of unexplored terms the interconnections of activity and activity systems, and



of activity systems and communities, culture, and political economy. We are, then, trying to furnish the social world in a way that begins to do justice to the structured forms and relations in which legitimate peripheral participation takes place. Relational, historical conceptions have emerged from this exercise, and this decentering tendency is characteristic of the means we have explored for grasping "person," "activity," "knowing," and the "social world."

The *person* has been correspondingly transformed into a practitioner, a newcomer becoming an old-timer, whose changing knowledge, skill, and discourse are part of a developing identity – in short, a member of a community of practice. This idea of identity/membership is strongly tied to a conception of motivation. If the person is both member of a community and agent of activity, the concept of the person closely links meaning and action in the world.

*Situated learning activity* has been transformed into legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice. Legitimate peripheral participation moves in a centripetal direction, motivated by its location in a field of mature practice. It is motivated by the growing use value of participation, and by newcomers' desires to become full practitioners. Communities of practice have histories and developmental cycles, and reproduce themselves in such a way that the transformation of newcomers into old-timers becomes unremarkably integral to the practice.

*Knowing* is inherent in the growth and transformation of identities and it is located in relations among practitioners, their practice, the artifacts of that practice, and the social organization and political economy of communities of practice. For newcomers, their shifting location as they move centripetally through a complex form of practice creates possibilities for

understanding the world as experienced. Denying access and limiting the centripetal movement of newcomers and other practitioners changes the learning curriculum. This raises questions – in specific settings, we hope – about what opportunities exist for knowing in practice: about the process of transparency for newcomers. These questions remain distinct from either official or idealized versions of what is meant to be learned or should be learnable.

All of this takes place in a *social world*, dialectically constituted in social practices that are in the process of reproduction, transformation, and change. The challenging problem has been to address the structural character of that world at the level at which it is lived. As a conceptual bridge, legitimate peripheral participation has allowed us to generate analytic terms and questions fundamental to this analysis. In addition to forms of membership and construction of identities, these terms and questions include the location and organization of mastery in communities; problems of power, access, and transparency; developmental cycles of communities of practice; change as part of what it means to be a community of practice; and its basis in the contradiction between continuity and displacement.



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